

Vermont transportation workers and National Guard personnel conduct an engineer assessment from the aftermath of Hurricane Irene. More than a mile of road is destroyed on Route 107 in Stockbridge, Vt. Members of the Maine National Guard were rebuilding the road on Labor Day, Sept. 5, 2011. Maine National Guard photo

Vermont Official Praises National Guard for Storm Help

By Army Staff Sgt. Jim Greenhill

National Guard Bureau

RUTLAND, Vt., Sept. 6, 2011 – The National Guard is essential to Vermont's recovery from Hurricane Irene, the director of the state's crippled road system said here Sept. 4.



Vermont transportation workers and National Guard personnel conduct an engineer assessment from the aftermath of Hurricane Irene. More than a mile of road is destroyed on Route 107 in Stockbridge, Vt. Members of the Maine National Guard were rebuilding the road on Labor Day, Sept. 5, 2011. Maine National Guard photo (Click photo for screen-resolution image); [high-resolution image](#) available.

"I don't believe we could do it without you," said Brian Searles, Vermont's secretary of transportation.

A week after post-Irene flooding crippled arterial roads through the state, the Vermont National Guard's Task Force Green Mountain Spirit is leading a multi-state effort to support civil authorities who are helping affected residents and reconnecting cut-off communities with the rest of the world.

"We're just so thrilled that the National Guard has come through [in] this way so quickly, and we're looking forward to getting to the end of this," Searles said.

More than 2,500 Guard members worked through the Labor Day weekend in Connecticut, Massachusetts, New Jersey, New York, North Carolina, Puerto Rico, Rhode Island and Vermont to assist residents and repair roads in the storm's aftermath.

More than 700 members of the Vermont National Guard are mobilized here, said Air Force Lt. Col. Lloyd Goodrow, state

public affairs officer, and they have been joined by Guard members from supporting states, including Connecticut, Illinois, Maine and New Hampshire. More troops and equipment are en route from Ohio, South Carolina and Virginia. "What began as a Vermont National Guard mission has now become a true multi-state National Guard mission, and that's something we're very proud of," Goodrow said. "States continue to call to lend their hand. This is a time when, really, the National Guard shines."

Late Sept. 3 and through the early morning hours the following day, a convoy of 118 military vehicles and about 200 National Guard members rolled in here after a 12-hour drive from Maine, bringing heavy equipment to speed the repair of Vermont's roads.

"We need engineering units and construction units," Searles said. "Everybody involved in Vermont has been working on this, but they really needed to be augmented."

Vermont has its own equipment and its Guard members are at work -- including the 131st Engineers -- but widespread damage to the state's road system has left many residents separated from jobs and outside services. The fall leaf season that normally draws thousands of tourists here and the winter ski season -- both important to the state's economy -- are also imminent.

The Maine National Guard "feels incredibly honored to assist in the recovery operation to the people of Vermont, overcoming these serious infrastructure damages," said Army Lt. Col. Normand Michaud, commander, 133rd Engineer Battalion.

The Maine Engineer Task Force -- about 200 Maine Army and Air National Guard members -- responded within 36 hours to the state of Vermont request, Michaud said, bringing 169 pieces of heavy engineering equipment -- including D7 bulldozers, 20-ton dump trucks and excavators -- to assist the people of Vermont.

While much of Vermont was spared the worst of Hurricane Irene and is open for business as usual, key east-west roads in the state's famed central mountains are closed. Residents discuss agonizing work commutes that include detours into surrounding states to try to work around road closures. Important trucking corridors are impassable.

"It's about reconnecting people to their jobs, to their groceries," Searles said. "It's also about commerce."

The topography that gives Vermont its scenic beauty -- rugged mountains, steep valleys, narrow streams and low-lying pastures -- also brings the state's greatest challenges. When four miles of Route 107 -- including one river-eaten stretch about a mile long -- were damaged by the flooding, it cut off some communities completely and added many hours and dozens of miles to the routine drives of even those who could get out of their towns.

"It's the biggest event in my lifetime, for sure," Searles said. "It's been compared to the flood of 1927 and ... there are a couple of rivers that have exceeded 1927 water levels," which claimed 85 lives.

"We know a lot more about how to deal with these sorts of things and save lives than we did back then," he said. But Irene wreaked havoc with essential infrastructure.

"The comparisons with 1927 are valid," he said.